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## Introduction to *Beyond the language classroom: researching MOOCs and other innovations*

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# 1 Introduction to *Beyond the language classroom: researching MOOCs and other innovations*

Kan Qian<sup>1</sup> and Stephen Bax<sup>2</sup>

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The last ten years have witnessed an explosion in terms of the opportunities and resources available for language learning. A decade ago, the student of a new language was largely limited to print materials, recordings, the language classroom, or perhaps a visit abroad. Nowadays, he or she can sit in an armchair or at an airport, with a simple laptop computer or mobile phone, and access all the rich and varied input and the opportunities for interactive output which are key ingredients of the language learning process (cf. Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In addition, learners now have access to innumerable online resources to help them with grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and more, and can even join free or cheap Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to learn in social settings with help from educators and peers. In these spheres, language learning is at the same time becoming less formal – indeed the whole issue of informality in language learning is increasing in importance. As Lamy (2013) suggests in this quotation, the boundaries are becoming ever more blurred:

“Formal learning can take place in a formal setting (e.g. instructor-anchored courses) or an informal one (e.g. Facebook adjuncts to courses). Informal learning too can occur in formal settings or informal ones” (p. 220).

In this sense, we see the rise of the truly ‘liberated learner’, freed from defined spaces and formal structures, eyes wide open at the sumptuous feast of language

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1. The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom; qian.kan@open.ac.uk

2. The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom; stephen.bax@open.ac.uk

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learning resources and opportunities spread out on offer, MOOCs and a whole lot more. It is easy to imagine such a learner asking, rightly or wrongly: who needs the classroom now?

This move out of the language classroom is not entirely new, of course. To take just one example, at the Open University in the United Kingdom, where the editors of this volume are based, we have been teaching language at a distance for over 25 years. Even so, every language teacher in the world must now be forced, by recent rapid increases in technological opportunities for language learning as exemplified by MOOCs and other innovations, to rethink all areas of their pedagogical activities.

It is this rapid change in the whole landscape of language education and its implications for pedagogy and practice which form the rationale and basis for this volume. Our aim is to work with our contributing authors to research and reflect on MOOCs and a number of other key innovations which we can hear calling loudly from outside the classroom walls. Our approach here is not to examine these innovations naively but to research them with caution and scepticism, in the light of the available evidence, in the awareness that not every innovation or new technology is necessarily an unalloyed benefit as it becomes normalised (Bax, 2003).

Our starting point is the MOVE-ME project funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme, the impetus for our cooperation, described by **Donatella Troncarelli and Andrea Villarini**. As they report there, the project aims at developing learning paths specifically for those many students in European 'mobility' programmes, and the use of MOOCs was considered potentially valuable in this endeavour, as they recount.

This is followed by six papers examining important and different aspects of a variety of MOOCs.

**Zhang Xinying** examines an innovative *MOOC + Flipped Classroom Mode* developed at Shenzhen University in China. **Inge de Waard and Kathy**

**Demeulenaere** research an interesting *MOOC-CLIL project* using MOOCs to increase language as well as social and online learning skills in a Belgian secondary school. **Jue Wang-Szilas and Joël Bellassen** then evaluate *The Introductory Chinese MOOC Kit*, the first Chinese MOOC for French speaking learners. Addressing some interesting questions about the aims of MOOCs in general, in the context of the EU-funded Move-Me project, **Laura McLoughlin and Francesca Magnoni** discuss and research *xMOOCs and cMOOCs*, and in the process consider how a MOOC can include metacognitive skills and strategies. An issue of increasing interest is how MOOCs fit with other educational activities. **Marina Orsini-Jones, Barbara Conde Gafaro, and Shooq Altamimi** examine through an interesting case study the ways in which a MOOC can be integrated with a formal curriculum. **Anna Motzo and Anna Proudfoot** close the section by discussing the experience of an innovative Italian MOOC offered by the Open University.

The following chapters then turn to examine other innovations.

**Amanda Mason and Zhang Wenxin** discuss mobile applications to support the learning of Chinese characters. The interesting and unusual example of a project in rural Armenia is examined by **Lilit Bekaryan, Zaruhi Soghomonyan, and Arusyak Harutyunyan**. On the subject of informal learning, **Tita Beaven, Mara Fuertes Gutiérrez, and Anna Motzo** consider and reflect on an innovative eTandem programme which had informality as a key ingredient. We end the volume with **Anne Van Marsenille's** discussion of another informal approach, this time involving French-speaking higher education students in Brussels learning English and Dutch.

Together, then, these contributors offer a fascinating range of insights into the ways in which language learners, as we suggested above, are now emerging liberated from the classroom and other formal settings and finding for themselves new spaces, new directions and new resources. In the process, they are becoming more aware of their own learning strategies (partly due to the new learning design, and partly due to learners taking more control over their learning) as part of new modes of 'self-regulated learning' (Nussbaumer et al., 2015). Our

contributors explore MOOCs as a salient example of these innovative language learning spaces, but they also address other important ways of learning beyond the classroom. They provide important research-based insights into how teachers and educational administrators should deal with these changes, to the benefit of the liberated learners and their teachers and guides of the future.

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